

FROM FAITH TO PEACE: HOW CATHOLIC SISTERS' CONGREGATIONAL CHARISM SHAPES GRASSROOTS PEACE- BUILDING IN CONFLICT-AFFECTED SOUTH SUDAN

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: This article examines the peacebuilding agency of Catholic Sisters in Rumbek North County, Lakes State, South Sudan, with particular attention to the role of congregational charism in shaping peacebuilding outcomes.

Statement of the problem: Peacebuilding scholarship increasingly recognizes the importance of local actors and everyday practices in sustaining peace, yet organizational and moral resources that enable particular actors to sustain grassroots peacebuilding remain insufficiently understood.

Methodology: Drawing on a mixed-methods design, the study combines survey data from 185 Catholic Sisters with 10 key informant interviews and five focus group discussions. Quantitative analysis uses descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation and multiple regression, while qualitative evidence is analyzed thematically and integrated through triangulation.

Results of the study: The findings show that Sisters engage in multidimensional peacebuilding through education, healthcare, trauma healing, livelihood support, youth engagement, mediation and social cohesion initiatives despite significant financial, infrastructural and socio-cultural constraints. Most importantly, congregational charism demonstrates the strongest statistically significant association with reported peacebuilding outcomes ($\beta = .535$, $p < .001$), while approaches to addressing challenges also show a significant positive association ($\beta = .274$, $p < .001$). Qualitative findings suggest that charism operates through moral commitment, relational legitimacy, perseverance and adaptive engagement.

Conclusion: The study concludes that Catholic Sisters make a significant and multidimensional contribution to peacebuilding in Rumbek North County through dialogue, youth mentorship, education, healthcare, and dispute resolution, with Congregational charism providing a strong foundation for their effectiveness. It further concludes that financial constraints, mistrust, cultural barriers, weak infrastructure, and limited participation in decision-making constrain their impact, despite the sisters' adaptive strategies and partnerships.

Recommendations: The study recommends strengthening youth mentorship, civic education, trauma healing, and community dialogue while improving predictable funding through partnerships with government, NGOs, and donors. It further recommends institutionalizing training in mediation and advocacy, integrating charism into peacebuilding programs, and strengthening Sisters' participation in peace committees and government structures to promote sustainable community cohesion and stability.

Keywords: *Congregational charism; Catholic Sisters; grassroots peacebuilding; religious peacebuilding; women peacebuilders; South Sudan.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Peacebuilding scholarship has increasingly moved beyond an exclusive focus on formal peace agreements, state institutions and elite settlements toward the local and everyday practices through which conflict-affected communities sustain coexistence and social order (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Mac Ginty, 2014, 2021). This shift has highlighted the agency of local actors, including women, whose contributions to mediation, reconciliation, social protection and community mobilization often remain underrepresented in formal peace processes (Paffenholz, 2015; Ogega, 2023; Tripp et al., 2025). In South Sudan, however, a persistent gap remains between women's recognized importance in peacebuilding and their substantive influence within formal political and security processes (Deng & Madut, 2025; Nyuon, 2025). Religious actors constitute an important but insufficiently differentiated dimension of this local peacebuilding landscape, particularly women religious whose work combines faith, social service, community relationships and institutional vocation. This article examines the peacebuilding agency of Catholic Sisters in Rumbek North County, Lakes State, South Sudan, focusing specifically on how congregational charism may shape their peacebuilding practices and perceived outcomes.

Background to the Study

South Sudan provides a particularly important setting for examining the relationship between formal peacebuilding and grassroots peace agency. Since independence in 2011, political conflict, communal violence, displacement and institutional fragility have repeatedly disrupted processes of state formation and social reconstruction. The country's peacebuilding environment therefore illustrates a broader problem identified in critical peacebuilding

scholarship: formal political settlements may establish institutional frameworks for peace without necessarily transforming the everyday relationships, local grievances and social structures through which violence is reproduced (Lederach, 1997; Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013). Local peacebuilding therefore matters not as a substitute for national political settlement, but as a parallel arena in which communities negotiate relationships and manage conflict.

The South Sudanese case also illustrates the gendered character of this relationship. The Revitalized Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS) established a 35 percent provision for women's representation in transitional governance. Yet formal inclusion has remained substantially weaker than the agreement's normative commitments. Recent scholarship describes a continuing disjuncture between women's participation in grassroots peacebuilding and their access to formal political decision-making (Deng & Madut, 2025; Nyuon, 2025). This is consistent with broader feminist peacebuilding scholarship, which cautions against equating numerical inclusion with substantive political agency. Women may do significant peace work at the community level while remaining excluded from the institutions that distribute political authority and resources.

This disjuncture makes South Sudan especially relevant to the literature on local and everyday peace. Recent scholarship shows that women peacebuilders often operate through activities not formally classified as peacebuilding, including livelihood support, education, social protection, care work, community mobilization, and intergroup relationship-building (Tripp et al., 2025). Such practices complicate conventional distinctions between humanitarian assistance, development and peacebuilding. They suggest that peacebuilding capacity may be embedded in long-term social relationships rather than only in formally designated peace institutions.

However, the emphasis on local agency must itself be approached critically. The local turn has been influential precisely because it challenges externally driven and institutionally standardized approaches to peacebuilding, but scholars have warned against romanticizing local actors or assuming that local institutions are necessarily inclusive or emancipatory (Paffenholz, 2015; Rigual, 2018). More recent feminist scholarship demonstrates that local peacebuilding can simultaneously facilitate reconciliation and reproduce gendered hierarchies (Fosu & Gordon, 2025). The analytical task is therefore to examine the specific social position, resources and power relations of local actors rather than treating "the local" as a unified category. It is within this context that Catholic Sisters become analytically significant. Women religious occupy an unusual institutional position. They are embedded in communities through schools, health facilities, pastoral activities, humanitarian services and social programmes, while simultaneously belonging to religious congregations with translocal organizational structures and distinctive spiritual identities. Their peacebuilding capacity may therefore derive not only from proximity to communities but also from organizational continuity, vocational commitment and accumulated relational legitimacy.

The distinction between religious identity and congregational charism is important here. Scholarship on Catholic women religious identifies charism as a component of congregational identity and as a resource through which members interpret their vocation, mission and institutional belonging (Johnson et al., 2014). Charism is therefore not simply an abstract theological belief. It can shape the meaning attached to service, sacrifice, solidarity, compassion and responsibility. The empirical question addressed in this article is whether, and through what mechanisms, these characteristics become relevant to peacebuilding practice. The Rumbek North case thus permits a more specific examination of an issue that remains insufficiently developed in existing scholarship: whether the effectiveness of grassroots peacebuilding depends only on the activities undertaken, or also on the moral, relational and organizational resources through which those activities are sustained. This distinction provides the basis for examining congregational charism as a potential mechanism linking religious vocation to peacebuilding practice.

Statement of the problem

The 21st century, is a period where globally, regionally and locally there has been numerous challenges including global and domestic terrorism, health crises, civil conflicts, food insecurities, and other pressing survival challenges (Marina, 2023). The research indicates that including women in the negotiation tables is of great importance if long-lasting peace and stable countries are to be realized. While religious actors' and women's efforts are sought in peacebuilding, the bridging group of actors' - women active in peacebuilding on religious basis has significantly remained invisible. Reviewed studies demonstrate that there is inadequate research on the role of religious women in the Africa region, especially the Catholic Sisters despite their active participation at all the different levels of peacebuilding the - top, middle and grassroots - in aim of addressing the deep-rooted conflicts. Catholic sisters who for decades have been actively involved in both humanitarian and peacebuilding activities. However, this contribution receives little or no attention or no attention. Thus, the importance of this study that focuses on the Catholic Sisters South Sudan, contribution to community sustainable peacebuilding in Rumbek, Lake State, South Sudan.

Research objectives

The specific objectives of this study were to:

1. Examine the peacebuilding activities Catholic Sisters in Rumbek, Lakes, State, South Sudan engage in.
2. Analyse the challenges Catholic Sisters face in implementing peacebuilding initiatives in Rumbek, Lakes State, South Sudan.
3. Establish the approaches used by Catholic Sisters to address these challenges in Rumbek, Lakes State, South Sudan.

4. Assess the influence of the Sisters Congregation's Charism on sustainable peacebuilding in Rumbek, Lakes State, South Sudan.

Research questions

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What peacebuilding activities do the Catholic Sisters in Rumbek, Lakes State, South Sudan engage in?
2. What challenges do Catholic Sisters encounter in peacebuilding in Rumbek, Lakes State, South Sudan?
3. What approaches do Catholic Sisters use to address challenges faced in the peacebuilding initiatives in? Rumbek, Lakes State, South Sudan?
4. To what extent do the Catholic Sisters' Congregation Charism influence their peacebuilding initiatives in Rumbek, Lakes State, South Sudan?

2. THEORETICAL REVIEW/FRAMEWORK

The article draws on three complementary theoretical perspectives: conflict transformation, feminist peacebuilding, and critical religious peacebuilding. These perspectives are brought together through the concept of congregational charism to explain how religious vocation may become a resource for sustained grassroots peacebuilding.

Lederach's (1997) conflict transformation approach provides the primary framework for understanding peacebuilding as a relational and long-term process rather than simply the termination of armed violence. Conflict transformation directs attention to relationships, social structures and patterns of interaction that generate or reproduce conflict. Its multi-level perspective distinguishes among top-level political actors, middle-range actors and grassroots actors, while emphasizing the relationships connecting these levels. This framework is particularly appropriate for examining Catholic Sisters because their activities operate across several levels. At the grassroots level, Sisters work directly with families, women, youth and vulnerable communities. At the middle level, they engage community leaders, churches, civil society organizations and local authorities. Through congregational and diocesan structures, they may also connect communities to national and international institutions. Their institutional location therefore enables them to function as relational intermediaries.

However, Lederach's framework does not by itself explain why particular grassroots actors are able to sustain such relationships under conditions of insecurity and resource scarcity. The framework identifies the importance of relational infrastructure but provides less explanation of the internal moral and organizational resources through which individual actors maintain long-term engagement. This is where the second and third theoretical perspectives become important.

Feminist peacebuilding scholarship contributes an analysis of power, gender and agency. Rather than assuming that peacebuilding is gender neutral, feminist approaches examine how conflict and peacebuilding are structured by gendered divisions of labour, authority and political participation. Women's exclusion from formal institutions does not eliminate their agency; instead, it often relocates peacebuilding into less visible community spaces. This perspective helps explain why Catholic Sisters may exercise forms of peace agency that are not captured by conventional indicators of political participation. Their work in education, healthcare, social protection, trauma healing and community mediation may emerge from gendered social roles but should not be reduced to supposedly natural female capacities for caring or reconciliation. Recent scholarship on women's local peacebuilding demonstrates that women's agency is socially and politically produced and can challenge as well as reproduce existing gender relations (Ogega, 2023; Tripp et al., 2025).

Feminist scholarship also introduces a necessary caution. Women peacebuilders should not be romanticized as inherently peaceful actors. Their agency operates within structures of inequality and may itself be constrained by patriarchal religious institutions, community hierarchies and political exclusion. The study therefore treats Sisters as political and institutional actors rather than as naturally peace-oriented women.

The third perspective comes from critical scholarship on religious peacebuilding. Omer and Tarusarira (2023) argue that religious peacebuilding should be approached historically, critically and intersectionally rather than through an assumption that religion is intrinsically conducive to peace. Religious actors can reproduce exclusion as well as facilitate reconciliation, and religious institutions are themselves embedded in broader political and social structures. This perspective is particularly important for the present study because the Catholic Church is not treated as a unitary actor. The analytical focus is specifically on women religious and their congregational organization. The study therefore asks what is distinctive about the institutional location of Sisters and how their religious vocation interacts with their peacebuilding practices.

Congregational Charism as an Analytical Mechanism

The three theoretical perspectives are connected through the concept of congregational charism. Charism is understood here as the distinctive spiritual, normative and organizational orientation associated with a religious congregation's founding tradition and reproduced through its communal identity, formation and mission (Johnson et al., 2014). This article conceptualizes charism as a potential mediating resource, rather than as an independent causal force. The concept of charism-mediated peacebuilding therefore refers to the process through which congregational identity and religious vocation are translated into practical peacebuilding capacities.

Four mechanisms are proposed. First, moral commitment. Charism may provide a normative basis for understanding peacebuilding as vocation rather than merely employment or externally funded programming. Second, relational legitimacy. Long-term engagement in education, healthcare, pastoral work and social services may enable Sisters to accumulate trust and relational access that can subsequently facilitate dialogue and mediation. Third, organizational continuity. Congregational structures may allow peacebuilding engagement to persist beyond individual projects, funding cycles or short-term interventions. Fourth, adaptive capacity. Religious values and organizational identity may enable Sisters to modify their activities in response to changing conflict conditions while maintaining a broader commitment to service and reconciliation.

The concept should therefore not be interpreted as evidence that Catholic faith produces peace. Rather, it identifies a possible mechanism through which religious vocation becomes organizational and relational capacity. This distinction is important because it allows the study to engage critically with religious peacebuilding scholarship while also generating a proposition that can be examined empirically. The study consequently advances the following proposition:

'Where congregational charism is translated into moral commitment, relational legitimacy, organizational continuity and adaptive practice, women religious may possess greater capacity to sustain grassroots peacebuilding under conditions of conflict and institutional fragility'.

3. EMPIRICAL REVIEW

This review is organized around four interconnected debates. The first concerns the shift from elite-centred peacebuilding toward local and everyday peace. The second examines feminist scholarship on women's peacebuilding agency and the limits of formal inclusion. The third considers religious peacebuilding and the unresolved question of how religious identity becomes peacebuilding practice. The fourth focuses specifically on women religious and congregational identity. Bringing these literatures together reveals a theoretical gap concerning the organizational and moral resources through which women religious sustain grassroots peacebuilding.

Local and Everyday Peacebuilding

A major development in peace and conflict scholarship has been the "local turn" in peacebuilding. Mac Ginty and Richmond (2013) challenged approaches that locate peace primarily within formal political institutions and international interventions by highlighting local actors, practices, and forms of agency. Mac Ginty's (2014, 2021) concept of everyday peace extends this argument by focusing on ordinary practices through which people navigate

conflict, sustain relationships and reduce the possibility of violence in divided societies. This literature is important for understanding Catholic Sisters because much of their peacebuilding occurs through activities that do not necessarily carry the institutional label of "peacebuilding." Education, healthcare, pastoral care, psychosocial support, youth engagement, livelihood assistance and community accompaniment may contribute to peace by strengthening relationships and reducing vulnerabilities even when they are not designed as conventional peace interventions. The everyday peace perspective therefore allows these activities to be understood as part of the social infrastructure that sustains peaceful coexistence.

However, the local turn has generated substantial criticism. Paffenholz (2015) argues that some versions of the local turn rely on a binary distinction between local and international actors and risk romanticizing local institutions while overlooking local elites and power relations. Rigual (2018) similarly argues that localization can reproduce gendered and hierarchical relations if the "local" is treated as inherently emancipatory. Fosu and Gordon (2025) extend this critique by showing that local peacebuilding mechanisms may simultaneously facilitate reconciliation and reproduce gender inequalities. These critiques are important for the present study because they prevent an uncritical interpretation of Catholic Sisters as inherently legitimate or peaceful local actors. Their community embeddedness may generate trust and access, but legitimacy is socially produced and may be contested. The analytical question is therefore not whether the Sisters are "local," but how their particular institutional position enables them to acquire and sustain relational legitimacy.

Women, Peacebuilding and the Problem of Formal Inclusion

The Women, Peace and Security literature has transformed understandings of women from passive victims of conflict toward political actors involved in prevention, mediation, peacebuilding and reconstruction (UN Security Council, 2000). Yet feminist scholarship has also demonstrated that the formal inclusion of women does not necessarily translate into substantive influence. Numerical representation can coexist with marginalization from agenda-setting, resource allocation and decision-making. This distinction is especially relevant in South Sudan. The R-ARCSS established a 35 percent representation provision for women, but recent scholarship continues to document a gap between formal commitments and substantive participation (Deng & Madut, 2025; Nyuon, 2025). The literature consequently raises a paradox: women may be recognized as necessary participants in peacebuilding while the institutional structures that determine political authority continue to exclude them.

At the same time, scholarship on women's local peacebuilding demonstrates that exclusion from formal structures does not imply political passivity. Tripp et al. (2025), studying women peacebuilders in Mali and Nigeria, identify bridge-building across social divisions, livelihood initiatives, community mobilization and advocacy as mechanisms through which women sustain peace in environments where formal peacebuilding has experienced significant

setbacks. Ogega (2023) similarly demonstrates that women of faith in Kenya combine social, political, cultural and spiritual resources in their peacebuilding activities. These studies move the debate beyond the question of whether women participate in peacebuilding. However, they also leave a further analytical question. If women with similar levels of community engagement can produce different outcomes, what explains variation in the durability and effectiveness of their peacebuilding? Social networks, legitimacy and community embeddedness are part of the explanation, but the institutional and moral resources that sustain these relationships remain comparatively under-theorized.

Religious Peacebuilding: Beyond the Assumption that Religion Produces Peace

The religious peacebuilding literature provides a second body of scholarship through which the role of Catholic Sisters can be interpreted. Earlier approaches frequently treated religion as either a source of conflict or a potential source of moral authority for peace. More recent scholarship has complicated this binary. Omer and Tarusarira (2023) argue for an intersectional, critical and discursive approach that avoids treating religion as a homogeneous or inherently peace-producing category. Omer (2023) similarly calls attention to the political and historical contexts in which religious actors operate.

This perspective is particularly important because the category "religious actor" encompasses organizations and individuals with different forms of authority, resources and institutional location. A bishop, parish priest, religious congregation, lay organization and women religious may all be formally associated with the Catholic Church while possessing very different forms of social access and political influence. The literature on women of faith begins to address this problem. Women religious peacebuilders have historically received less scholarly attention than male religious leaders, despite their involvement in reconciliation, humanitarian assistance, education, social protection and community mobilization. Ogega (2023) shows that women's religious identities can provide resources for peacebuilding while simultaneously interacting with gendered constraints. Wilkinson (2023) similarly highlights the importance of faith-based local actors in humanitarian settings. Yet the religious peacebuilding literature still tends to conceptualize religion at the level of belief, identity, institution or moral authority. What receives less attention is the process through which religious identity becomes sustained organizational practice. This is the conceptual space in which congregational charism becomes relevant.

Congregational Charism and Women Religious

Catholic religious congregations are not simply administrative units within the Church. They are communities organized around distinctive histories, spiritualities, missions and founding traditions. Johnson et al. (2014) identify charism as one of the distinguishing elements of

Catholic religious institute identity, while scholarship on women religious demonstrates that founding charisms can shape how congregations understand mission, community and service.

Charism can therefore be understood as an organizationally embedded form of religious identity. It provides members with a vocabulary through which they interpret their vocation and a set of normative orientations through which they understand service to others. Importantly, however, charism should not be treated as a fixed theological essence. Congregations reinterpret founding traditions in response to changing social contexts, and the meaning of charism is reproduced through formation, communal life and ministry. This distinction provides an important bridge between religious studies and peacebuilding scholarship. If charism is an organizationally embedded form of identity, it may influence peacebuilding not by directly "causing peace" but by shaping how Sisters understand responsibility, suffering, service, reconciliation and relationships with communities. It may also contribute to organizational continuity when peacebuilding environments are characterized by uncertainty and limited material incentives.

The existing literature therefore leaves a specific gap. Scholarship has established that women exercise grassroots peace agency; that local peacebuilding depends on relationships and everyday practices; and that religious actors can contribute to reconciliation and conflict transformation. However, these literatures have rarely been brought together to examine whether and how the distinctive charism of women's religious congregations becomes a resource for sustained peacebuilding.

Synthesis and Research Gap

The literature reveals three unresolved relationships. First, the local peacebuilding literature emphasizes relational and everyday agency but does not sufficiently explain the organizational resources that enable particular local actors to sustain such agency. Second, feminist peacebuilding scholarship demonstrates women's extensive grassroots agency but leaves variation in the durability and effectiveness of women's peacebuilding insufficiently explained. Third, religious peacebuilding scholarship recognizes moral and institutional resources but often treats religious actors as organizationally homogeneous and religion as a broad category.

This article brings these debates together by conceptualizing congregational charism as a potential mechanism linking religious vocation to peacebuilding practice. The central proposition is not that Catholic faith inherently produces peace. Rather, it is that congregational charism may shape the motivation, relational practices, organizational continuity and adaptive strategies through which peacebuilding activities acquire legitimacy and are sustained over time. The empirical analysis therefore examines whether congregational charism is associated with peacebuilding outcomes and uses qualitative evidence to investigate the mechanisms that may account for this relationship. In doing so,

the study seeks to extend scholarship from a focus on what women peacebuilders do toward a more theoretically informed examination of what enables them to sustain what they do.

4. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This proposed research study integrates various principles of peace mainstreaming as factors of community development. The research has both the dependent and independent variable. First, the research interrogates the community programs that the sample undertook to find out how inclusive, to find out their success. Figure 1 above, illustrated the conceptual framework of the study. It depicted how the peace building arrangements by women actors, more specific, the Catholic sisters, influence peace at grassroot level. The peace was evaluated in the context of stability restoration, and full functioning of state institutions and alleviation of the socioeconomic plight among the locals. This relationship was moderated by the peacebuilding. The approach was redefined in the context of values and belief systems that shaped peace actions and initiatives by the Catholic sisters in Rumbek, South Sudan.

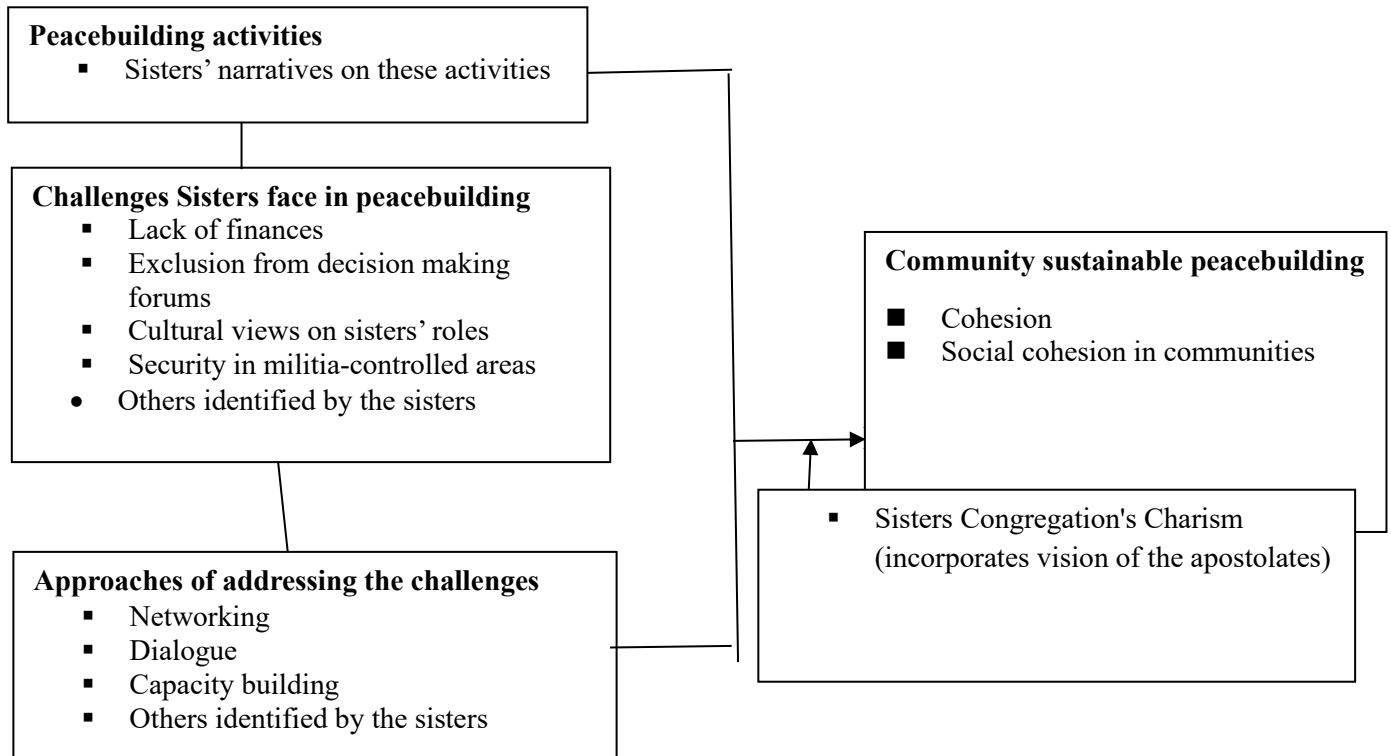


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The article draws on a mixed-methods study conducted in Rumbek North County, Lakes State, South Sudan. The study adopted a mixed-methods design because the research sought both to measure the relationships among key peacebuilding variables and to understand the lived experiences underlying those relationships. The quantitative strand generated standardized

evidence concerning peacebuilding activities, challenges, approaches, congregational charism, and outcomes, while the qualitative strand provided contextual explanations and participant narratives. The two strands were integrated through triangulation. Rumbek North was selected because it represents a conflict-affected setting in which community-level tensions, resource disputes, social divisions, and weak infrastructure intersect with the activities of religious and community institutions. The study area was relatively secure during the period of data collection. The study population consisted primarily of Catholic Sisters serving through different religious congregations and apostolic ministries. The original target population was approximately 1,000 Sisters, from which a sample size of 286 was calculated.

The quantitative component involved 185 Catholic Sisters, producing a response rate of approximately 64.7% of the targeted sample. The respondents represented multiple congregations, allowing the analysis to incorporate diversity in apostolic missions and congregational identities. The dissertation reports representation from fourteen congregations. The qualitative component comprised 10 key informant interviews and five focus group discussions. Key informants included senior Sisters, congregational leaders, program coordinators, church leaders, and community stakeholders with direct knowledge of the peacebuilding initiatives. The five focus groups involved Sisters from different congregations and apostolates. The survey instrument used five-point Likert-scale items and measured five major constructs: Peacebuilding Activities (PB); Challenges in Peacebuilding (CH); Approaches Used to Address Challenges (AP); Influence of Catholic Sisters' Congregation Charism (CSCC); and Peacebuilding Outcomes (OUT). The qualitative interviews and focus groups explored the meaning of peacebuilding, experiences of conflict, challenges, strategies, community relationships, and the role of religious values and congregational identity. The ethical clearance was obtained from National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation.

Reliability, Validity, and Analysis

The questionnaire demonstrated satisfactory internal consistency. Cronbach's alpha values ranged from .722 to .859 across the five constructs, exceeding the conventional .70 threshold. Content and face validity were established through expert review, while construct validity was examined using principal component analysis. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, Pearson correlation, and multiple regression. The regression model assessed the extent to which peacebuilding activities, challenges, approaches, and congregational charism predicted peacebuilding outcomes. Qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis. The qualitative evidence was then integrated with the quantitative findings to explain statistical relationships and identify mechanisms that could not be captured through survey measures alone. The mixed-methods was particularly important for interpreting the finding concerning congregational charism because statistical association by itself cannot explain how faith-informed values are translated into peacebuilding practices.

6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The first major finding is that Catholic Sisters undertake a considerably broader range of peacebuilding activities than might be assumed from conventional definitions of religious ministry. The study identified eleven major apostolate areas through the qualitative data: trauma healing, orphan care, girls' education, healthcare, peace education, Women's Desk initiatives, dispute resolution, child safeguarding, livelihood training, youth engagement, and related forms of community support. Quantitatively, youth mentorship, civic education, and advocacy for social cohesion were among the most frequently reported activities. This finding supports a multidimensional understanding of grassroots peacebuilding. The Sisters do not separate peacebuilding neatly from social development. Instead, education, healthcare, psychosocial care, livelihood support, and reconciliation are interconnected components of community stability. This is consistent with Omer's (2023) observation that religious actors often engage in peacebuilding through service provision and development activities. It also corresponds with evidence from women peacebuilders elsewhere in Africa, where social support, economic activities, education, and community mobilization frequently become mechanisms for preventing or mitigating conflict. The finding also illustrates Lederach's (1997) argument that peacebuilding requires attention to relationships and social structures rather than only political settlements. By working with young people, women, families, and vulnerable populations, Sisters contribute to the relational foundations upon which longer-term peace depends.

The second finding is that Sisters undertake this work under significant structural constraints. Financial limitations, community mistrust, and cultural barriers emerged as major challenges. Qualitative participants identified additional constraints, including language differences, poor roads and transportation, weakened traditional leadership structures, deep inter-clan tensions, shortages of medical resources, and limited availability of trained peace educators. Approximately 70% of respondents reported facing internal and external challenges simultaneously. This finding is consistent with wider scholarship on women peacebuilders, which demonstrates that women's agency is exercised within unequal institutional and social structures rather than in conditions of unrestricted choice. Recent research on South Sudan likewise emphasizes the barriers that women-led organizations face when attempting to obtain formal leadership roles and resources. The important point, however, is that challenges did not simply terminate the Sisters' peacebuilding activities. Instead, the qualitative evidence suggests that Sisters developed adaptive strategies to continue operating. This distinction becomes important in interpreting the regression findings. Challenges themselves were not a statistically significant predictor of peacebuilding outcomes. Their significance therefore lies less in directly determining outcomes than in creating an environment in which adaptive capacity becomes necessary.

The third finding concerns the strategies used by Sisters to address these constraints. Advocacy, NGO collaboration, and capacity building were among the most commonly reported approaches. Qualitative evidence emphasized dialogue forums, faith-integrated programming, local mediation, scholarships, leadership training, and community engagement. External partnerships involved NGOs, other congregations, and government institutions. The predominance of community engagement is significant. Rather than relying exclusively on external institutions, Sisters work through local relationships and community structures. They also connect communities with external resources. The dissertation consequently characterizes them as connectors between grassroots communities and wider peacebuilding institutions.

These findings parallels recent scholarship emphasizing locally led peacebuilding in South Sudan. A 2024 PeaceRep workshop report on local peacemaking in South Sudan highlighted the continuing significance of local peace actors and mechanisms. More recent research similarly demonstrates that local peace committees, traditional institutions, and community actors can provide important safeguards against the destabilizing effects of national-level political tensions, although their capacity remains constrained. The Sisters' approaches can therefore be understood as a form of adaptive peacebuilding. They do not merely implement a fixed program model; they adjust their practices to the resources, relationships, risks, and cultural circumstances encountered in particular communities.

The most significant quantitative finding concerns congregational charism. The correlation analysis showed a strong positive association between congregational charism and peacebuilding outcomes ($r = .808$, $p < .01$), the strongest correlation among the principal variables. Approaches to addressing challenges were also strongly correlated with outcomes ($r = .752$, $p < .01$), while peacebuilding activities and challenges demonstrated moderate positive relationships with outcomes. The multiple regression analysis produced an even more important result. The model generated an R of .841 and an R^2 of .706, meaning that approximately 70.6% of the variance in the measured peacebuilding outcomes was explained by the four predictors collectively. The standardized coefficients are presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Regression Coefficient Analysis

Predictor	β	p-value
Peacebuilding Activities	.070	.259
Challenges	.040	.564
Approaches	.274	< .001
Congregational Charism	.535	< .001

The results captured in the table above indicate that congregational charism had the strongest statistically significant association with peacebuilding outcomes, followed by the approaches

used to address challenges. Peacebuilding activities and challenges were positive but statistically insignificant when the other predictors were included. The regression should be interpreted as evidence of statistical association within the study sample rather than evidence of causal effect." This finding produces the central puzzle of the article. If activities alone do not significantly predict outcomes, what converts those activities into effective peacebuilding? The qualitative evidence offers an explanation. Participants repeatedly described faith-informed values as sources of motivation, legitimacy, perseverance, and relational engagement. One Sister explained:

"Our values of forgiveness and service help communities see that reconciliation is possible. Without faith, this work would be impossible. It is what keeps us going when everything else fails."

This narrative is important because it connects the statistical finding to a mechanism. Charism is not operating merely as an abstract theological identity. It is translated into practices of forgiveness, service, perseverance, accompaniment, and reconciliation.

Three mechanisms emerge from the qualitative evidence. First, charism generates moral commitment. Sisters understand their peacebuilding activities as part of a broader religious vocation. This makes peacebuilding more than a project or professional occupation. It becomes an expression of religious identity and responsibility. Second, charism contributes to relational legitimacy. Sisters' engagement is embedded in long-term community service. Education, healthcare, pastoral work, care for vulnerable populations, and humanitarian assistance create relationships through which Sisters may acquire trust and access. Their peacebuilding therefore benefits from relational capital accumulated through activities that may not initially be classified as peace interventions. Third, charism contributes to perseverance. Peacebuilding in Rumbek North occurs in conditions in which conventional incentives for sustained engagement are weak. The values associated with service, sacrifice, forgiveness, and commitment provide an internal basis for continuing the work despite constraints. These mechanisms help explain why charism and approaches are more significant predictors than the simple presence of activities. Activities are the visible component of peacebuilding, but charism and approaches may constitute part of the underlying infrastructure that determines whether those activities generate meaningful relationships and outcomes.

Discussion

The findings provide an opportunity to revisit the three bodies of scholarship that frame the study: local and everyday peacebuilding, feminist peacebuilding, and religious peacebuilding. The central empirical result is that peacebuilding activities and challenges do not remain statistically significant predictors of peacebuilding outcomes once approaches to challenges and congregational charism are included in the regression model. Congregational charism has

the strongest standardized coefficient ($\beta = .535$, $p < .001$), followed by approaches used to address challenges ($\beta = .274$, $p < .001$). The qualitative evidence provides insight into this relationship by identifying moral commitment, relational legitimacy, perseverance and adaptive engagement as mechanisms through which Sisters translate religious vocation into peacebuilding practice.

The first implication concerns how peacebuilding effectiveness is conceptualized. Conventional program-oriented approaches often assess peacebuilding through observable activities and outputs: meetings held, people trained, beneficiaries reached, organizations established, or services delivered. Such measures are important, but the present findings suggest that activity volume alone may not capture the conditions under which peacebuilding becomes effective. This finding extends the literature on everyday peace. Mac Ginty (2014, 2021) argues that everyday peace resides in ordinary practices and relationships through which people navigate conflict and maintain coexistence. The Sisters' activities illustrate this logic: education, healthcare, psychosocial care, livelihood support and youth engagement may not be classified as peace interventions, yet they create relationships through which mediation, dialogue and reconciliation become possible.

The findings nevertheless add an important qualification. Everyday peace literature can identify the importance of everyday practices without fully explaining why some actors are able to sustain those practices over long periods. In this study, the statistical significance of congregational charism suggests that the organizational and moral resources behind everyday practices may matter as much as the practices themselves. The implication is not that activities are unimportant. Rather, activities appear to operate within a wider relational and organizational environment. A dialogue meeting may have limited effect if participants do not trust the facilitator; a peace education programme may have limited durability if the implementing organization lacks continuity; and a mediation intervention may fail if the mediator lacks legitimacy. Peacebuilding outcomes may therefore depend partly upon the relationships and institutional identities through which activities are delivered.

The second implication concerns feminist peacebuilding scholarship. The findings reinforce scholarship demonstrating that women's peace agency extends beyond formal political institutions. The Sisters' activities in education, healthcare, trauma healing, youth engagement, livelihood support and mediation demonstrate forms of political agency that are not captured by indicators of women's participation in peace negotiations. This finding is consistent with Tripp et al. (2025), who show that women's local peacebuilding in African conflict settings operates through bridge-building, livelihood activities, community initiatives and advocacy. It also resonates with Ogega's (2023) analysis of women of faith, in which religious identity interacts with social and cultural resources to enable peacebuilding despite structural constraints.

The present study nevertheless extends this scholarship in an important way. Much research on women's peacebuilding explains agency through women's social location, networks, community roles or exclusion from formal institutions. The findings here suggest that organizational identity may provide an additional source of agency. Catholic Sisters do not simply operate as women within communities; they operate as members of religious congregations with distinctive missions, structures and normative commitments. This distinction helps avoid two opposite analytical errors. The first is to treat women as passive victims whose peacebuilding must be explained primarily through vulnerability. The second is to romanticize women's agency as inherently peaceful or socially transformative. The Sisters' agency is instead understood as institutionally situated and shaped by a specific form of religious organization.

The findings also contribute to the debate surrounding the local turn. The Sisters' community embeddedness appears to facilitate trust, access and sustained engagement. This supports scholarship emphasizing local ownership, everyday peace and relational forms of peacebuilding (Mac Ginty & Richmond, 2013; Mac Ginty, 2021). However, the study also confirms why local peacebuilding should not be romanticized. Fosu and Gordon (2025) demonstrate that local peacebuilding can reproduce gendered power relations, while Paffenholz (2015) cautions that local institutions may contain their own hierarchies and elites. The Sisters' position illustrates a somewhat different mechanism: their legitimacy appears to derive not simply from being "local" but from accumulated relationships created through long-term social services and community engagement.

This distinction is theoretically important. It suggests that local legitimacy is relational rather than geographical. An actor does not become legitimate simply by belonging to the community. Legitimacy develops through repeated interaction, demonstrated commitment, service and perceptions of trustworthiness. Congregational charism may contribute to this process by sustaining forms of engagement that generate relational capital over time. The findings therefore refine the local-turn argument: the relevant analytical question is not simply whether peacebuilding is locally owned, but how local actors acquire, reproduce and exercise legitimacy. The findings also speak directly to critical religious peacebuilding scholarship. Omer and Tarusarira (2023) caution against treating religious actors or religion as homogeneous categories and call for approaches that attend to historical, political and intersectional dimensions of religious peacebuilding.

The present findings support this caution. The Sisters' peacebuilding cannot be explained simply by identifying them as Catholic. What matters analytically is the translation of religious vocation into particular practices: forgiveness, accompaniment, service, perseverance, dialogue and reconciliation. These practices emerge through congregational life and institutional mission rather than from religious identity in the abstract. This provides the basis for the concept of charism-mediated peacebuilding. The concept moves the analysis from

religion as identity toward religion as organizationally mediated practice. Religious identity tells us something about who the actor is; belief tells us something about what the actor believes; congregational charism helps explain how religious vocation organizes action.

This distinction also avoids a functionalist interpretation of religion. The argument is not that congregations possess certain religious values and therefore produce peace. Rather, charism becomes analytically relevant when it is institutionalized through formation, communal identity, organizational mission and repeated practices of engagement. The strongest empirical finding is the statistical association between congregational charism and peacebuilding outcomes. The qualitative evidence suggests three principal mechanisms: moral commitment, relational legitimacy and perseverance, with adaptive capacity cutting across all three. This finding extends Lederach's (1997) concept of relational infrastructure. Lederach emphasizes the relationships and networks required for sustainable conflict transformation. The present study suggests that relational infrastructure may have an internal dimension: actors require not only networks around them but also normative and organizational resources that sustain their willingness and capacity to maintain those relationships.

Charism may therefore be understood as a form of relational-organizational infrastructure. It does not replace physical institutions, resources or political agreements. Instead, it may operate alongside them by sustaining the human relationships through which peacebuilding interventions become meaningful. This interpretation aligns with scholarship showing that women of faith may draw on religious resources to sustain peacebuilding in environments where formal political opportunities are limited (Ogega, 2023). It also contributes to the religious peacebuilding literature by specifying a mechanism rather than treating religion as a generalized source of moral authority.

7. CONCLUSIONS

The study concludes that Catholic Sisters play a significant and multidimensional role in peacebuilding in Rumbek North County through youth mentorship, education, healthcare, dialogue, and dispute resolution. It further concludes that financial constraints, mistrust, cultural barriers, weak infrastructure, and limited participation in decision-making constrain their effectiveness, although Sisters employ dialogue, capacity building, and partnerships to address these challenges. The study also concludes that Congregational charism provides a strong moral and spiritual foundation for peacebuilding, while Sisters contribute to trust, dialogue, and cooperation. However, persistent gender inequality, resource conflicts, and historical grievances require sustained institutional and policy support.

8. RECOMMENDATIONS

The study recommends that Catholic Sisters strengthen and scale up peacebuilding activities, particularly youth mentorship, civic education, and trauma healing. The study recommends

diversified and predictable funding through partnerships with NGOs, government, and donors, alongside resource pooling and measures to address cultural, infrastructural, and security challenges. The study further recommends continuous training in mediation, dialogue facilitation, and advocacy, as well as stronger community capacity building. Congregations should integrate charism-based values into peacebuilding programmes and recognise charism as a strategic asset. Additionally, the study recommends stronger engagement with authorities and peace committees to secure institutional support and promote sustainable community cohesion and stability. Finally, further studies could involve gender-specific research examining the comparative effectiveness of women-led versus mixed-gender peacebuilding initiatives to deepen understanding of the specific mechanisms through which women's participation enhances peacebuilding outcomes.

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